

The Builder.

No. CCCCLIII.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1851.



Our present number, we place before our readers the ground-plan of the intended Record Office, recently commenced on the Rolls Estate, Chancery-lane, together with a view of the north front.* The building will stand between Chancery-lane and Fetter-lane, and will face northward a new-street to be hereafter formed from the West-end to the City, and of which Carey-street widened will make a part. The present position of the Rolls House and the Rolls Chapel is shown on the plan: these will not be removed at present:† the central portion, only, of the new building (between the wings), will be erected at first, and the Rolls House will probably be used for the accommodation of the deputy keeper of the records, the secretary, and their clerks. The site suggested for the future enlargement of the Repository, is where the Crown Office in Chancery, and the Judges' Chambers stand. The land is the property of the Crown, and the leases had been allowed to run out, so that no purchases or compensations were required.

The present unsafe and improper position of the national records is well known. They are dispersed in the White and Wakefield Towers, in the Tower of London; the Rolls House, the Carlton Ride, the Chapter House at Westminster, and other places; exposed to dangers, it has been pointed out, such as no-prudent tradesman would expose his business books to. The necessity for a safe general repository for the records has long been felt and discussed. Mr. Deering prepared plans for such a building, for the late Record Commissioners, so long ago as 1832: plans were also made by Mr. Barry; but it has been reserved for Mr. Pennethorne to carry out the intention. The conditions prescribed to him included these:—The provision of a thoroughly fire-proof and sound structure, completely within the boundaries of the Rolls estate; and sufficient space not merely for all the records now in the custody of the Master of the Rolls, but for all such as may reasonably be expected to accrue for, say, fifty years to come. Those already in his custody are computed at 122,000 cubic feet, including press-room: others to be committed to him such as those of the (sweetly-smelling) Palace Court, the Durham Records, &c., may be reckoned at 40,000 cubic feet, and it has been calculated that the accumulations of fifty years may amount to 50,000 feet. That portion of the new building which has been commenced, including the basement, will contain 60 cubes, each 17 feet by 25 feet, by 15 feet in height, of which 52 are calculated to be applied to the reception of records, 20 in the basement to workshops, or documents scarcely classed as records, and eight on the ground floor, for the searching room, and the rooms of the assistant keepers and clerks, who may

be required in attendance there. The Eastern wing, the second portion to be erected, would include the equivalent of 48 cubes, each 17 feet by 25 feet by 15 feet. The Western wing, the third portion to be erected, would include the equivalent of about 100 cubes, each 17 feet by 25 feet by 15 feet: a part of this portion, when built, would occupy, as we have said, the site of the Rolls House and Rolls Chapel, or the chapel might be embodied into it; but many years will elapse before it may be necessary to erect any of this portion, and the Rolls House may even then be left standing until every other part (except its own site) has been covered.

The three portions would in the aggregate afford 228 rooms, viz. 200 applicable for the reception of books and records (including the basement), and 20 for the establishment; the remaining eight being occupied as space for the wells for two staircases.

The 200 rooms would receive little short of half a million cubic feet of records. The whole length of the north front is 420 feet.

On a former occasion, Mr. Braidwood stated it to be his opinion that no single depository should contain more than 7,000 cubic feet, and that the best proportioned room would be 17 feet by 27 feet, and 15 feet high. In the present plans this width has been adopted, but the length has been reduced to 25 feet, that being considered the extreme length to which the light would well travel down the passages between the records. There was another consideration that weighed in the arrangement, and an important one, namely, the provision of strength to bear the great weight of the records. The floor of one of the depositories, 17 feet by 25 feet, would (exclusive of its own weight of about 26 tons), have to carry a weight of about 64 tons (which weight would of course be proportionately increased, if the width of the room were increased). Three floors of this size would thus cast a weight of 270 tons on the bearing or party walls, for which reason, and to avoid iron columns, as much as for security against fire, it has been deemed advisable to build the depositories small.

In the course of an inspection of various existing record depositories, made with Sir Francis Palgrave, the deputy-keeper, Mr. Pennethorne found by trials, as to the convenience afforded of obtaining access to the documents, that for records of an ordinary size it would be sufficient to provide passages 3 feet wide, and that 4 feet would afford ample means of access to the largest folios now in the custody of the Master of the Rolls; consequently, these widths have been adopted in the calculations made for ascertaining the capacity of the new buildings. From this inspection they did not obtain much information as to the necessity, or otherwise, of artificial warming, or as to the means of rendering the depositories fire-proof, for they did not find even the most valuable documents placed in a fire-proof depository, except at the record room of the Court of Chancery, and at the Prerogative Office; but even at this latter, the wills would become a mass of confusion, if the indexes, which are in the other part of the building, should be destroyed. The only really well-arranged and perfectly fire-proof depository they saw was the muniment-rooms of the Duke of Bedford, at Montague-street, Russell-sq. are. This building is erected entirely of brick and iron: the doors,

shutters, and presses are all iron: there is not a particle of wood used for any purpose: it is warmed by hot-water pipes under the stone floor, the furnace being outside the building.

On the subject of warming the Record Office the deputy keeper entertains a strong opinion adverse to the introduction of hot air by flues, or of hot water, preferring open fire-places, but maintaining that artificial heat of any kind is unnecessary. In a memorandum drawn up by him to support this view, Sir Francis gives the following examples, and very interesting they are:—

“1. About three years ago a small room was built in the Rolls Garden, for the purpose of containing papers brought from the Treasury. This is a case of yesterday, yet it is not without considerable value. The papers deposited in the room have been thoroughly soaked in foul water, in consequence of the overflowing of the drains, in the cellars of the Treasury, in which they had been long deposited. Some of the documents thus soaked were reduced to stinking pulp, and amongst those which were sound, are many from which the ink has been completely discharged by the wet. After having been thoroughly dried, they were put into chests, and the chests deposited in this building, the walls being composed of single bricks, and the roof covered with slate; and having occasion recently to open the boxes, I found the papers perfectly sound.

2. The record room of the Court of Chancery: this is a room vaulted with brick and paved with stone, being the ground-floor of the late Six Clerks' Office, and just above the level of the street (i. e. Chancery-lane). Here the bills, answers, and other Chancery proceedings are kept, and have been so for about seventy-five years. There is no artificial warming, nor any mode of warming; nor are there any means of ventilation, except by the occasional opening of the doors: the windows are never opened, but here all the documents are perfectly sound: seventy-five years is not a short period. The records themselves are not of the best description for preservation: for the parchment used during the last century, like all other record materials, is very much inferior to that employed in earlier times, and therefore more liable to decay: if I may use such a figure of speech, the constitution of a record of the time of George the Third is not a quarter as sound as a record of earlier periods; and a record of seventy-five years back is, in point of fact, a very aged and decrepid record compared with one of the time of Edward the First.

3. The Tower. No artificial heating or warming of any sort or kind has ever been applied or could ever have been employed in the Wakefield Tower, or in the Council Chamber, the Ante-chamber, and the Chapel, all in the White Tower, which repositories contain the rolls of the Chancery, and a vast number of other documents on parchment, vellum, and paper, the latter including some of the earliest specimens known in England, namely, letters on cotton papers from the Knights Templars and the southern parts of Europe of the reign of Edward the First.

These all are in perfect preservation. Very remarkable among them are certain documents designated as the ‘Brevia,’ which I found built up in close heaps on shelves against a naked stone wall in the White Tower. Several of the bundles had never been opened from the time of their first deposit: at least such was the case with a bundle of the time of Richard the Second. This was so perfectly preserved that the pounce flew off from the surface of the parchment when I opened it.

4. In Norwich Cathedral is a vaulted stone chamber, coeval with the original structure, built in the reign of Rufus, constituting the upper story of an apsidal chapel. This apartment is, and always has been, the treasury and muniment room of the cathedral; and here are deposited numerous Anglo-Norman charters and ancient rolls of every description, from the time of Henry the Third. Many are deposited in an ancient and shattered press of wood in

* See pp. 642 and 643, in our present number.

† The chapel has some curious monuments: the Rolls House was built by John Campbell, 1717.